

RESILIENCE IN HARD TIMES

Young Women Report Optimism in the Face of Pandemic Recession

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New IWPR survey data show that young women remain remarkably optimistic about achieving the "American dream" in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. To ensure young women stay on track toward achieving their dreams, policies that support them in their academic and professional pursuits should be prioritized.

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- A large share (81.8 percent) of young women report that they have achieved or are on their way to achieving the "American dream."
- Overall, 80.4 percent of currently employed young women report being "very" or "somewhat" satisfied with their chances for advancement in their jobs.
- Six out of ten young women report that they have already achieved their career goals or are optimistic about their ability to achieve them in the future.
- Six out of ten young women report they are "very" or "somewhat" likely to start their own families in the next five years.
- Only 30.3 percent of young women surveyed said they were worse off financially than their parents were at their age. A smaller group (21.8 percent) reported that COVID-19 had affected their finances more than others they know.



INTRODUCTION

The pandemic recession that began in early 2020 had a significant impact on young women's employment and economic security (Stevenson 2020). Research indicates that many young women, especially young Black and Latina women, were working in jobs that were hardest hit by the economic downturn (Sun 2021). While the federal government responded with policies to provide cash directly to families and unemployed workers, these supports were often one-time or temporary measures, leaving many struggling to make ends meet (Parolin, Curran, and Wimer 2020; Parolin et al. 2020).

A new survey from IWPR shows that, despite these challenges, women remain remarkably optimistic about their economic future and their ability to achieve the proverbial "American dream." In June 2021, IWPR surveyed 1,421 women aged 18 to 34 years to capture their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and early recovery period.¹ The samples were weighted to produce estimates representing the population of young women (aged 18 to 34) in the U.S.

Drawing on survey results, this brief examines young women's perspectives on their educational pursuits, employment and job opportunities, and starting families of their own, with a focus on how their experiences differ by race/ethnicity and gender and sexual identity. The brief also highlights how the young women surveyed weigh the opportunities and barriers they face compared to their peers as well as their parents at their age.

¹ To gain deeper insights into the LGBTQ community, similar to recent surveys from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine and Census Bureau, IWPR asked about gender identity and sexual orientation in multiple questions. Due to the sample size issues, responses were combined into two groups that we have labeled "LGBTQ or gender nonconforming" and "straight, cisgender women." The National Academy report refers to the universe of LGBTQ and nonbinary individuals as "sexual and gender diverse" while the Census Bureau uses "LGBT" and "non-LGBT." The target population of IWPR's survey was young women aged 18 to 34; those identifying as transgender and gender nonconforming were intentionally included in the survey sample. In the survey sample, a higher share of younger women (aged 18 to 24) than older women (aged 25 to 34) identify as LGBTQ or gender nonconforming. We ran our analyses of the disparities by gender identity and sexual orientation separately for the 18 to 24 and 25 to 34 age groups and the results are consistent. In this brief, we use "gender and sexual identity" interchangeably with "gender identity and sexual orientation."

LIVING THE AMERICAN DREAM

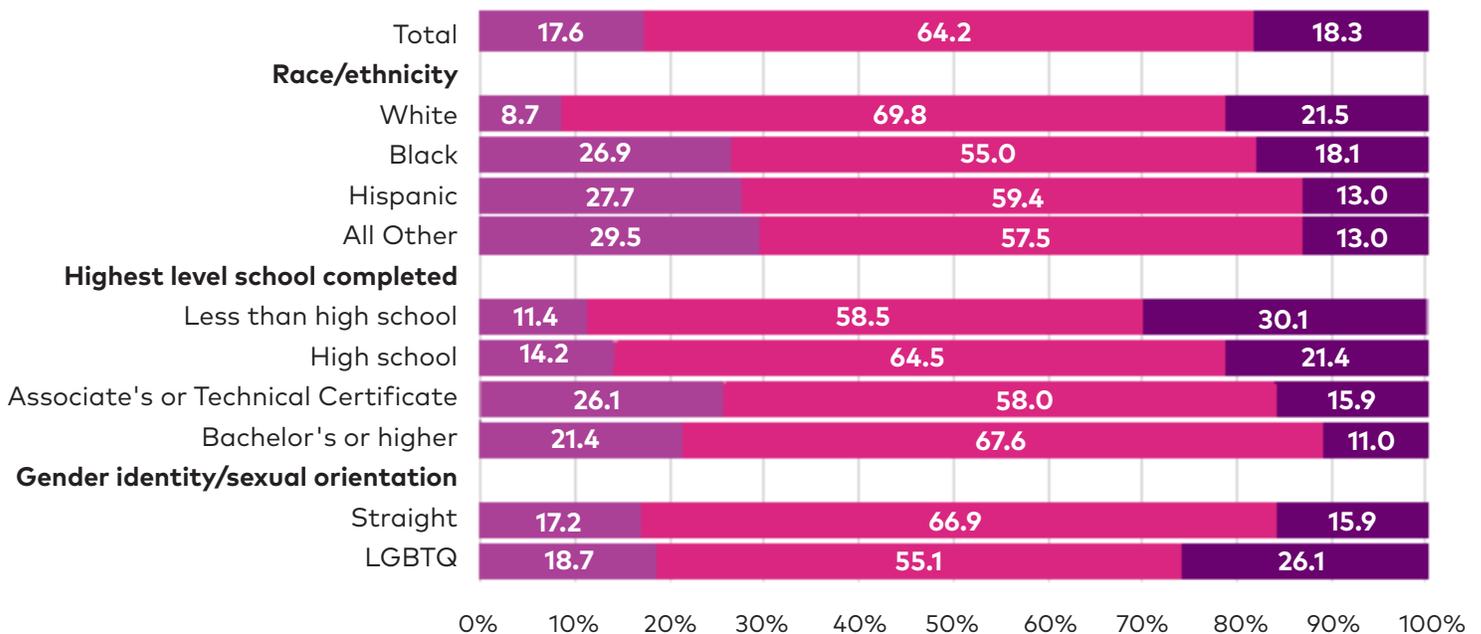
The traditional “American dream,” with its connotations of upward social mobility, economic self-sufficiency, and prosperity, remains an important goal for many Americans. IWPR’s recent survey found that, despite economic hurdles posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, more than four out of five young women (81.8 percent) believe they have achieved—or are on their way toward achieving—the “American dream” (Figure 1). The share is slightly lower among White women (78.5 percent) compared to Black women (81.9 percent), Hispanic women (87.1 percent), and women identifying with other racial and ethnic groups (87.0 percent). Among White women, the share who report they have already achieved the American dream (8.7 percent) is considerably smaller—roughly one-third of the share reported by the other racial and ethnic groups (26.9 to 29.5 percent).

The percentage of respondents who feel positively about their chances of achieving the American dream also varies by level of education and gender and sexual identities. Those with higher levels of education are more likely to feel they have already achieved or will achieve the dream, and less likely to say it is out of reach. Among those with a bachelor’s degree or higher, only 11.0 percent said the American dream is not attainable for them, compared with 30.1 percent of those with less than a high school diploma. Of those respondents who identified as LGBTQ, one in four (26.1 percent) report that the American dream is out of reach, compared to 15.9 percent among those identifying as straight, cisgender women.

FIGURE 1. Most Young Women Believe They Can Achieve the “American Dream”

The term “American dream” can mean different things to different people.
However you define it, do you believe...

■ You have achieved the American dream ■ You're on your way to achieving it ■ It is out of reach for you



Notes: Results are weighted to adjust oversamples to population totals based on the American Community Survey. Women of “all other” racial/ethnic groups include women who self-identified their race/ethnicity as American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or Other. This category also includes women who selected two or more races/ethnicities. “Straight” refers to respondents who identified as heterosexual, cisgender women; and “LGBTQ” includes respondents who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or gender nonconforming.

Source: IWPR Survey on the Status of Younger Women collected June 25 to 30, 2021. 1,427 respondents aged 18 to 34. Washington, DC: Institute for Women’s Policy Research.

MOVING UP THE LADDER: JOBS AND CAREERS

Overall, 80.4 percent of currently employed younger women report being “very” or “somewhat” satisfied with their chances for advancement in their jobs (Figure 2). Differences across groups are not substantial, but young White women appear slightly less satisfied (both “very” and overall) compared to Black, Hispanic, and other racial and ethnic groups. Across levels of education and gender and sexual identities, reported differences in satisfaction with advancement opportunities are very small.

FIGURE 2. Most Young Women Are At Least “Somewhat Satisfied” with Advancement Opportunities in Their Current Jobs

How satisfied are you with the chances for advancement at your current job?

Very satisfied Somewhat satisfied



Notes: Results are weighted to adjust oversamples to population totals based on the American Community Survey. Women of “all other” racial/ethnic groups include women who self-identified their race/ethnicity as American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or Other. This category also includes women who selected two or more races/ethnicities. “Straight” refers to respondents who identified as heterosexual, cisgender women; and “LGBTQ” includes respondents who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or gender nonconforming.

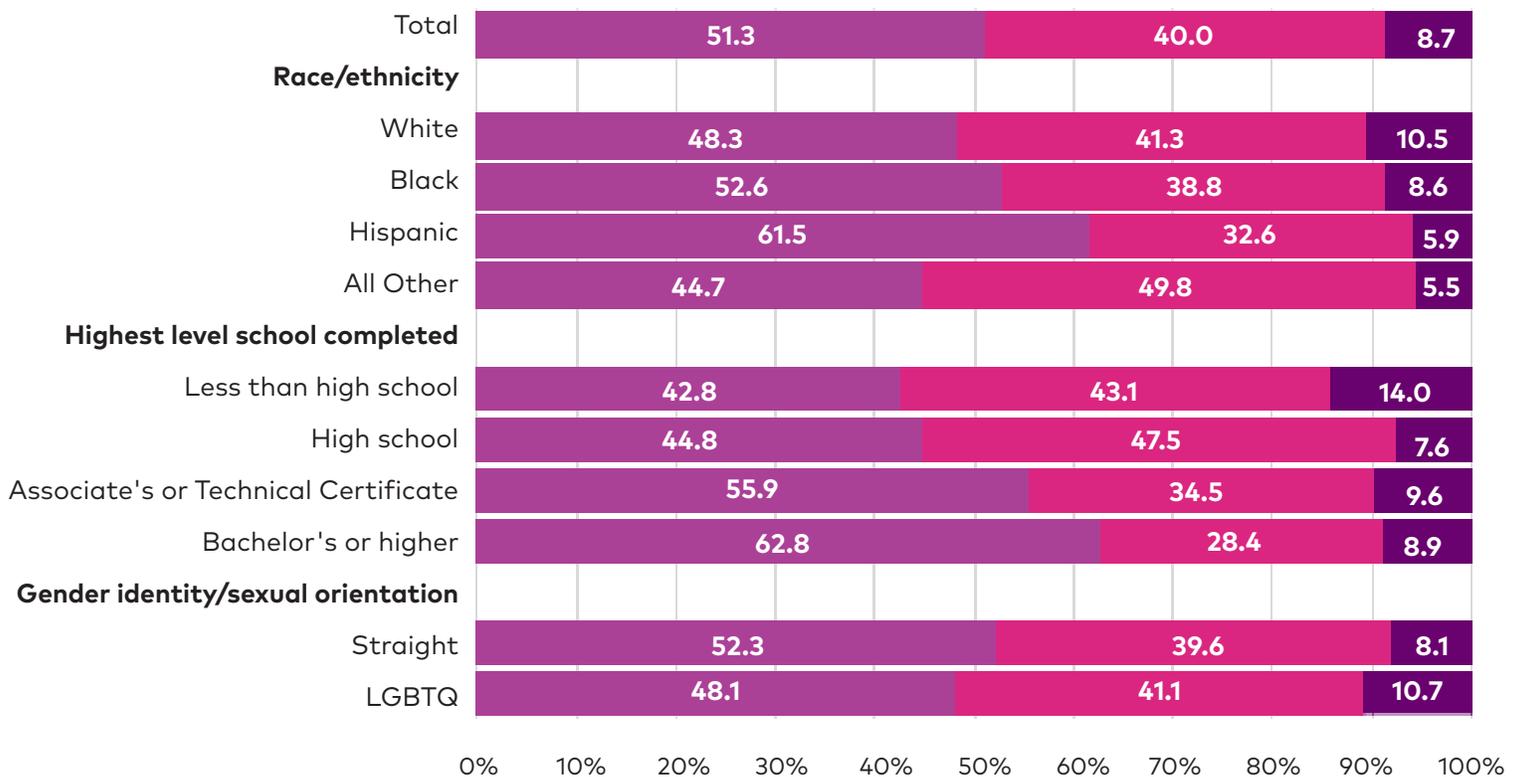
Source: IWPR Survey on the Status of Younger Women collected June 25 to 30, 2021. 1,427 respondents aged 18 to 34. Washington, DC: Institute for Women’s Policy Research.

Of every ten young women surveyed, six report that they have already achieved their career goals (8.7 percent) or are optimistic about their ability to achieve them in the future (51.3 percent; Figure 3). Differences across racial and ethnic groups are small. White women, however, are slightly more likely (10.5 percent) to respond that they have achieved their career goals, while larger shares of women who identified with "all other" racial/ethnic groups (49.8 percent) report being worried about achieving their goals. Similarly, those who identified as straight women are slightly more optimistic (52.3 percent) about future achievement. Just over one in ten (10.7 percent) LGBTQ respondents report having already reached their career goals.

FIGURE 3. Most Young Women Are Optimistic about Achieving Career Goals

Which of the following statements best describes how you think about your future job and career prospects?

- I am optimistic that I will be able to achieve my job or career goals
- I am worried that I will face many difficulties that might prevent me from achieving my job or career goals
- I have already reached the job or career goals I set for myself



Notes: Results are weighted to adjust oversamples to population totals based on the 2019 American Community Survey. Women of "all other" racial/ethnic groups include women who self-identified their race/ethnicity as American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or Other. This category also includes women who selected two or more races/ethnicities. "Straight" refers to respondents who identified as heterosexual, cisgender women; and "LGBTQ" includes respondents who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or gender nonconforming.
Source: IWPR Survey on the Status of Younger Women collected June 25 to 30, 2021. 1,427 respondents aged 18 to 34. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE: FAMILY ASPIRATIONS

While more than one in five (21 percent; not shown in figures) young women report postponing plans to start families during the COVID-19 pandemic, many young women do plan to start their own families in the near future (Figure 4).

Among those without young children, six in ten (59.9 percent) report they are “very” or “somewhat” likely to start their own families in the next five years. Larger shares of Black (75.0 percent) and Hispanic (68.7 percent) women report being likely to start their own families soon, compared to White (54.2 percent) women and women identifying with “all other” racial/ethnic groups (57.1 percent). More women with postsecondary degrees plan to start families soon, including those with associate’s degrees and technical certifications (74.4 percent) and those with bachelor’s or higher (69.1 percent) compared to their counterparts with a high school degree or less. Respondents who identified as LGBTQ are only slightly less likely to report plans to start a family (56.6 percent) compared to women who identified as straight (61.2 percent).

FIGURE 4. Young Women Remain Optimistic to Start Families in the Future

How likely are you to start a family within the next 5 years?

Very likely Somewhat likely



Notes: Results are weighted to adjust oversamples to population totals based on the American Community Survey. Women of “all other” racial/ethnic groups include women who self-identified their race/ethnicity as American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or Other. This category also includes women who selected two or more races/ethnicities. “Straight” refers to respondents who identified as heterosexual, cisgender women; and “LGBTQ” includes respondents who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or gender nonconforming.

Source: IWPR Survey on the Status of Younger Women collected June 25 to 30, 2021. 1,427 respondents aged 18 to 34. Washington, DC: Institute for Women’s Policy Research.

REFLECTING ON THEIR SITUATION: COMPARING TO PEERS AND PARENTS

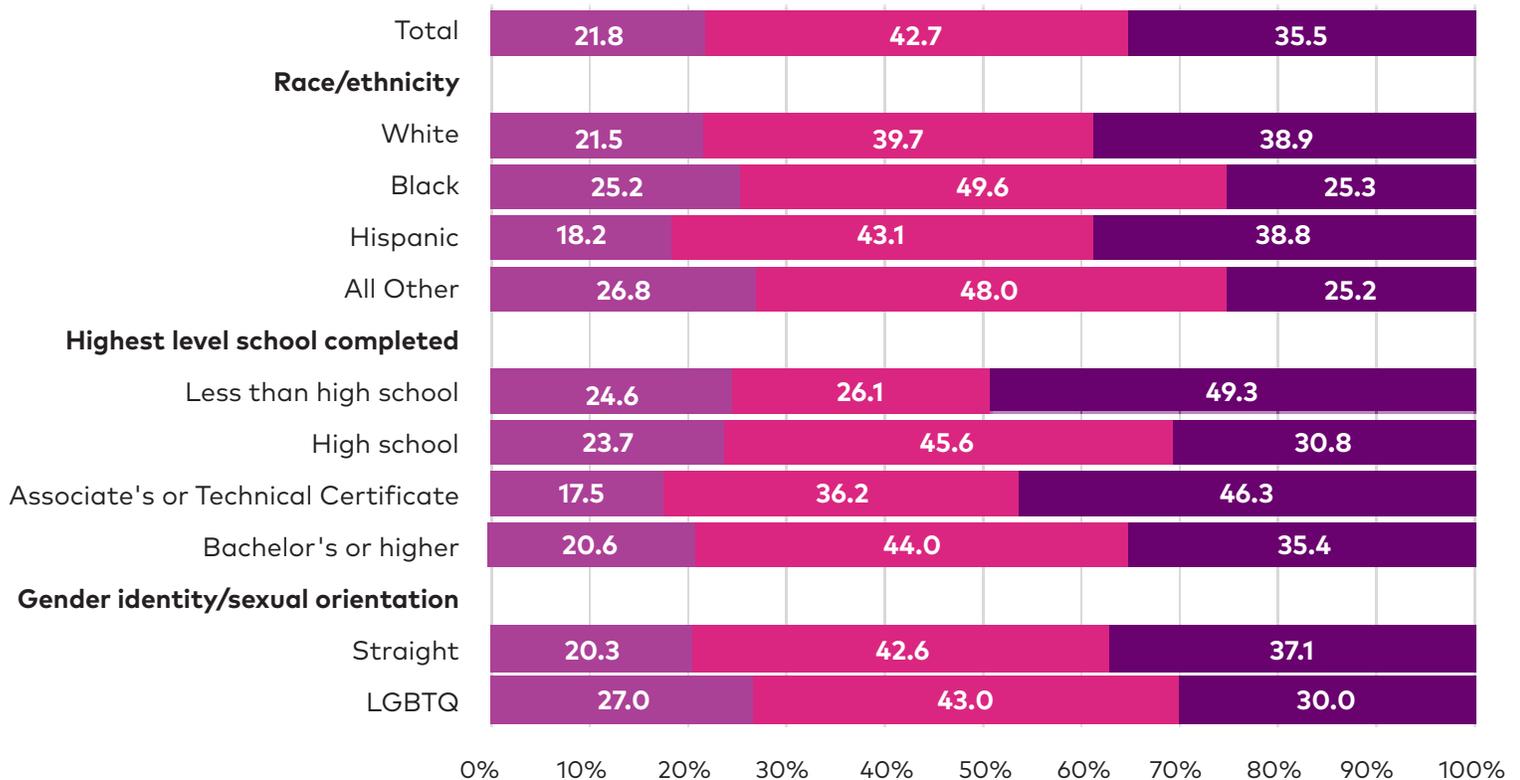
The IWPR survey asked respondents to compare their economic situations to (1) other people in their age group during the COVID-19 pandemic and economic downturn; and (2) their own parents' situation at about the same age.

Compared to their same-age peers, the most common response was that COVID-19 hurt their finances *less* than most people they know (42.7 percent)—followed by the pandemic affecting their finances “about the same” (35.5 percent). Still, 21.8 percent report that COVID-19 hurt their finances more than most others they know (Figure 5). The differences across racial and ethnic groups, levels of education, and gender and sexual identities are very small and generally follow the same pattern.

FIGURE 5. Young Women Consider COVID-19’s Economic Impacts Generally Worse for Others Their Age—or a Shared Challenge

Thinking about your situation in relation to most of the people you know who are around the same age, has the economic impact from the coronavirus outbreak...

- Hurt your finances MORE than most other people you know
- Hurt your finances LESS than most other people you know
- Impacted your finances ABOUT THE SAME as most other people you know



Notes: Results are weighted to adjust oversamples to population totals based on the American Community Survey. Women of “all other” racial/ethnic groups include women who self-identified their race/ethnicity as American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or Other. This category also includes women who selected two or more races/ethnicities. “Straight” refers to respondents who identified as heterosexual, cisgender women; and “LGBTQ” includes respondents who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or gender nonconforming.

Source: IWPR Survey on the Status of Younger Women collected June 25 to 30, 2021. 1,427 respondents aged 18 to 34. Washington, DC: Institute for Women’s Policy Research.

When asked to compare themselves financially to their parents when they were the same age, seven in ten respondents (69.7 percent) said they were better off or about the same. Overall, nearly four in ten respondents (39.4 percent) felt they are better off than their parents and three in ten (30.3 percent) felt their financial situation is similar to their parents' (Figure 6).

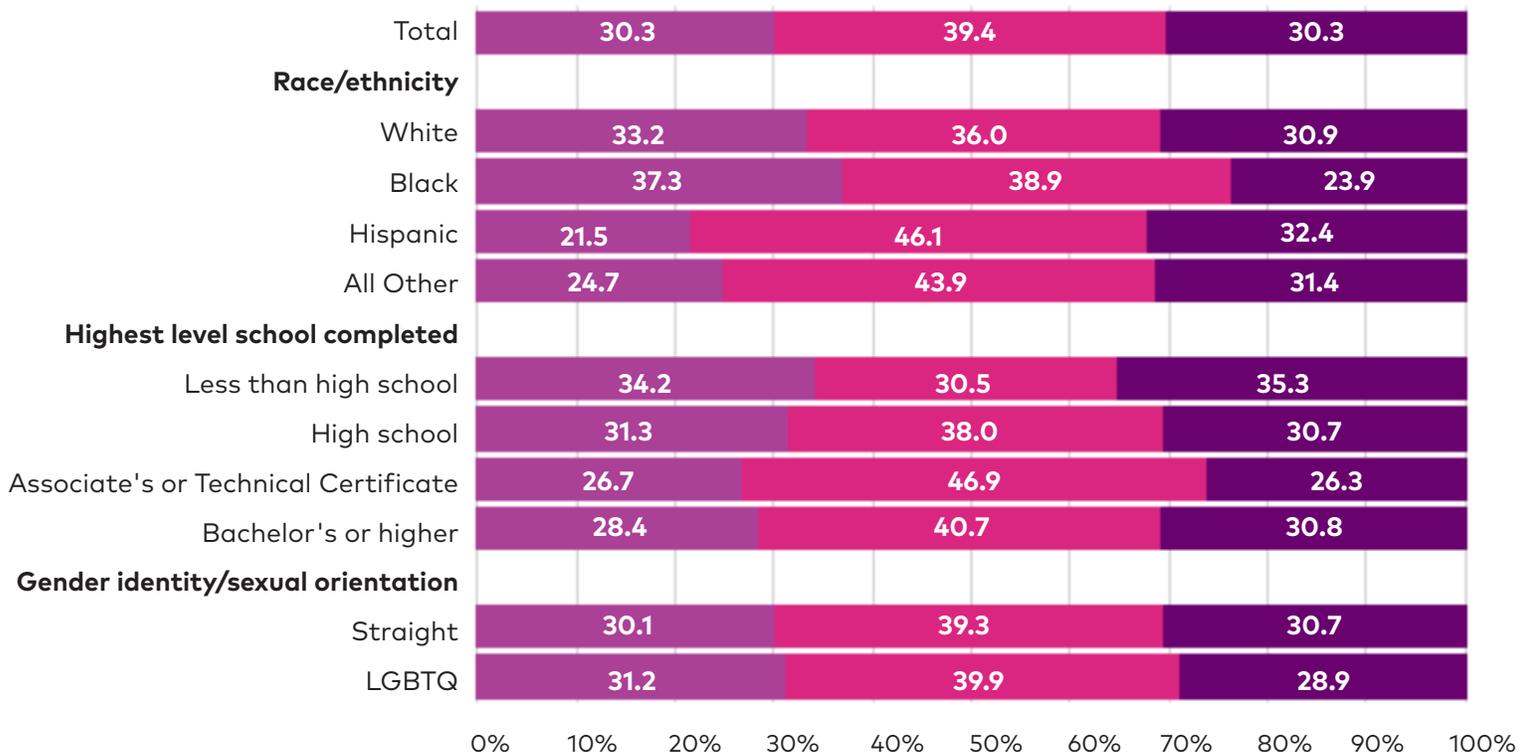
The share of young women responding "better off" is slightly lower for White women (36.0 percent) than for Black women (38.9 percent), Hispanic women (46.1 percent), and women identifying with "all other" racial and ethnic groups (43.9 percent). Among young women with different education levels, those with postsecondary degrees (46.9 percent with associate's degrees and 40.7 percent with bachelor's degrees or higher) are the most likely to see themselves as in a better position than their parents.

Overall, three in ten respondents (30.3 percent) felt their financial situation is worse than their parents' was at the same age. Among the racial and ethnic groups shown in Figure 6, young Black women were the most likely to say they are worse off (37.3 percent). More than one-third of young women without a high school degree say the same (34.2 percent), a larger share than among women with higher levels of education. There are no differences in how young women see themselves financially relative to their parents across gender and sexual identities.

FIGURE 6. Nearly Seven in Ten Young Women See Themselves as Better Off than or About the Same Financially as Their Parents Were at Their Age

Thinking about your parents, are you currently better off financially than they were at your age, worse off financially than they were at your age, or about the same?

■ I am worse off ■ I am better off ■ About the same



Notes: Results are weighted to adjust oversamples to population totals based on the American Community Survey. Women of "all other" racial/ethnic groups include women who self-identified their race/ethnicity as American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or Other. This category also includes women who selected two or more races/ethnicities. "Straight" refers to respondents who identified as heterosexual, cisgender women; and "LGBTQ" includes respondents who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or gender nonconforming.

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CONCLUSION

The pandemic has taken a toll on young women, stalling their careers and threatening to impact their long-term earnings (Sun 2021). Even in the face of these challenges, however, young women surveyed express resilience and hope for the future. A large majority believe they can achieve the “American dream.” At work, they are generally satisfied with their opportunities for advancement and most remain optimistic that they will have the opportunity to achieve their career and family goals. When they look at their economic situations relative to others their age, many young women see themselves as in the same boat or more fortunate than their peers. Similarly, many see themselves as financially better off than their parents were at their age.

The question then remains: What might support young women in staying on track to fulfill their dreams? Research shows that government action to mitigate economic suffering from the pandemic recession was effective in reducing poverty (Parolin, Curran, and Wimer 2020; Parolin et al. 2020). Future recovery policies and programs should then provide further support to young women who have been hit hardest by the recession, to ensure this ground is not lost. And, as most survey respondents expressed goals for growing both their careers and their families, policies focused on supporting women in balancing caregiving demands with work responsibilities are essential. Building out programs—like universal child care and paid family and medical leave—would also help ensure young women can enter the workforce, advance in their careers, and thrive (Jones and Wilcher 2020; Baum and Ruhm 2013). As the U.S. turns to recovery, young women’s ability to sustain employment and support their families will depend on it.

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Photo credit: FG Trade/Getty Images.

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